

The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
J. H. OLDHAM



No. 86

JUNE 18TH, 1941

DEAR MEMBER,

Encouraging reports have reached me from several sources about activities among youth in Westmorland. One of the cheering things at the present time is the way in which the education authorities and voluntary organisations in many parts of the country are throwing themselves into creative activities. The news from Westmorland is illustrative of much that is going on elsewhere.

In spite of the fact that it has not been possible up to the present to obtain any aid from public funds, the Director of Education has set up in a number of districts youth councils consisting of young people from youth organisations and the senior forms of schools, aided by advisory committees of older people engaged in the service of youth.

A small week-end conference of representatives of the district youth councils was held recently to consider how the youth of the country can train themselves to play their part in the creation of a Christian democracy and fulfil their responsibilities in local government and public affairs. There was evidence of a strong determination among the boys and girls to train themselves for the future by study, discussion groups, and evening classes, and by gaining familiarity with the procedure of local government.

A striking feature of the movement is the clear recognition by the young people of the relation of religion to the creation of a true democracy and their keen interest in this issue. The question of the relation of the Christian faith to the new developments for the education and welfare of youth and of the part which the Churches can take in the movement is a subject of much anxious questioning throughout the country and I have had many letters about it. In Westmorland representatives of the Youth Committee of the Churches have been in close consultation with the central youth committee of the county, who have accepted the syllabus drawn up by the former body. Arrangements have been made for a course of training in the meaning of the Christian faith and its implications for social life.

INTERNATIONAL FRIENDSHIP

The formation of Anglo-Czechoslovak and British and Dutch Christian Fellowships has already been reported in the News-Letter (C.N-L. No. 67). To these must now be added a Scandinavian-British Christian Fellowship formed at a meeting in London this month. The Rev. W. T. Elmslie presided at the meeting and the Bishop of London and representatives of Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden, were among those who spoke. The object is to provide during the war opportunities of closer contact between Scandinavians resident in this country and British people and to prepare the ground for closer co-operation between the Scandinavian and British Churches when the war is over. In the presence in this country of the members of many different nations we have an extraordinary opportunity, if we choose to use it, of building up the universal Christian fellowship by creating links of friendship with those who belong to other nations and yet share a common faith.

On Whitsunday a United Service of International Christian Witness was held in Westminster Abbey. Representatives of the Greek, Russian, Armenian, Rumanian,

Danish, Dutch, Finnish, French Protestant, German, Norwegian, Swedish, Swiss, Czechoslovak, Moravian, American and West African Churches as well as of the British Churches took part in the procession. A service of this kind is a symbol of the rich universality of the Church of Christ.

THE SUPPLEMENT

For some weeks I have been actively discussing with groups and with individual friends what as Christians we are going to do about the present spiritual crisis in the life of mankind. As a result the central meaning of the situation and the kind of action it demands have taken clearer shape in my mind. In this week's Supplement and the following one I give the conclusions to which I have been led. The foundations have already been stated in the News-Letter, more particularly in the Supplement to No. 45. I think I see more plainly what they involve in action. You will appreciate how difficult it is to deal in brief space with an immense situation and with the profundities of the spiritual response for which it calls. I need to ask for a special effort of understanding on your part. Communication has to take place at a deeper level than that of intellectual argument or understanding; what we need is a common *awareness*, in which feeling and will as well as mind are involved.

The situation is dark, but we must not run away from it. To face it is the only way to master it. We have to discipline ourselves both to look at it and to look beyond it. If we look beyond it, we can look at it without fear. Over against the picture given in the Supplement must be set the reality of an eternal world of light and truth and inexhaustible power breaking in on our darkened minds and setting in motion fresh vitalising currents in the impoverished and languishing life of society.

SOLD OUT

The recent Supplement on "The Nazi Creed" (C.N.-L. 80) met with great appreciation from our members. We have had many letters about it and several have urged that it should be given the widest circulation—wider than that of *Black Record*. Our stock of the Supplement is sold out, as is also that of the Supplement "Pater Noster," of which we reprinted 20,000. We have orders for several hundred of each, which we cannot meet. To face the cost of reprinting we need to know the probable extent of the demand. Will those of you who desire large numbers of either Supplement let us know at once the quantity you want?

Yours sincerely,

J. H. Oldham

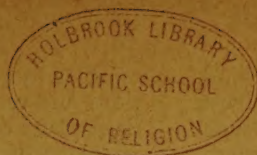
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JUNE 18TH 1941

THE PREDICAMENT OF SOCIETY AND THE WAY OUT

The subject of this and the following Supplement is the means of restoring health to our society. The time is ripe for action. There has been abundance of diagnosis. Our urgent need is for a creative response, which will enable us to meet the dangers and throw ourselves into constructive tasks with courage and hope.

But when I started to set down what I believe ought to be done, I found it necessary for two reasons to begin with a statement of the problem. The first is that we can act effectively together only if we have a common understanding of the situation to which action has to be directed. It is characteristic of modern society that the lives of all are bound up together, and in order to play our part we have to respond to the crisis in its total meaning; in meeting the particular demands made on us as individuals we need to be aware of the crisis in which the whole of human life is involved. While there is a remarkable agreement, as I shall urge, in regard to the nature of the crisis among those who have given serious thought to the subject, I doubt whether as yet this understanding has penetrated deeply or widely into the general mind. Unless the real predicament of men to-day is understood, what is said later about the way of salvation will have little point.

Secondly, it is from a right understanding of the actual predicament of society that we can learn God's will for us here and now. The situation is vast and confused, and the interpretations of it are legion. Can we get beyond these to something that is the real heart of the situation? Is there something which, if we will but listen, reality itself is saying to us? Everything hinges on this.

Many minds have wrestled with the problem, and I believe that the meaning of the situation can be stated in a form which is more than a merely individual interpretation and may be expected to command wide assent. I submitted a draft of the Supplement

to about thirty friends, representing different types of experience and differing in their outlook in many respects. Two-thirds of them were laymen. They practically all agreed that the analysis of the present state of society was substantially true.

If we are able to reach broad agreement about our predicament, a most important advance has been made. We know and have located the enemy; we can close our ranks and begin the attack. To understand the realities of the contemporary situation is to hear the voice of God speaking to us through them. If we respond with our whole being to that call a new world can come to birth.

THE DWARFING OF THE HUMAN PERSON

Amid the huge forces and unending complexity of modern society human freedom and responsibility are in danger of being lost. Man's existence as a person is in peril. The power of the individual in large-scale industry to shape the work in which he is engaged, or as voter in a constituency numbering tens of thousands to influence political decisions, is negligible.

At the beginning of the modern period of history men set out to subdue nature to their purposes and thereby enlarge their freedom. They have met in many directions with success beyond their dreams and still larger possibilities are within the reach of mankind. But somehow we have missed the way. When men set out to achieve certain ends, they too often leave important factors out of account, so that what they actually achieve is the very opposite of what they intended. The result of man's effort to shape the world according to his purpose has been to call into operation vast, mechanical, impersonal forces which deprive the majority of men of real existence as persons. A fundamental change of course is needed, if these forces are to be brought under the control of the human spirit and made to serve the true ends of man.

Confident in their power to make the kind of world they want, men have put their trust in rational planning. It is only by such planning that the complex forces of modern society can be directed to desirable ends. But in order to plan we need to know where we want to go. We cannot make too clear to ourselves that the inevitable effect of the rationalisation and planned control of human activities, taken by itself, is to restrict freedom of choice and reduce men from responsible persons to interchangeable units performing certain functions in society. In a planned economy even for those who direct things the area of choice is increasingly narrowed. The drift towards rational planning seems irresistible. What has happened on the continent makes it plain that when industry and trade are brought under central control, the danger is immense that the regulation will be extended to all spheres of life, including the cultural and the spiritual. The only way to overcome this menace is *consciously to plan for freedom* by making sure that every necessary extension of rational control is balanced by the creation of new opportunities for spontaneous activity and responsible decisions. Modern techniques do not *necessarily* diminish the power of the individual to resist the invasion of his personality ; but they will certainly do so unless we learn to master them and make them the instruments of a larger freedom.

There are as yet few who realise the magnitude either of the danger or of the effort required to overcome it. It is particularly difficult for clergy, teachers and writers—in fact for all who at present guide and educate thought—to understand the gravity of the problem. Our view of life is never free from the bias imparted by our individual circumstances and, short of a Nazi victory and the establishment of a completely totalitarian state, those included in the general description of “clerks” are among the last to be submerged by the advancing tide of centralised control. Protected from any sensible diminution of their individual freedom, they are slow to realise the extent to which its foundations are being undermined for others.

THE DECAY OF COMMUNITY

The large-scale organisation of modern life has to a great extent broken up the small communities in which men in association with their neighbours take decisions directly affecting their own lives, are bound to one

another in a system of acknowledged obligations and responsibilities and are consciously dependent on one another for mutual help. In place of persons living as members of a real community we have the modern phenomenon of the mass-man. Torn from his roots in an organic social life the individual becomes an isolated atom in a largely formless mass, swayed by mass emotions and an easy prey to appeals to his primitive impulses.

There are varying degrees of this disintegration. One of the friends whom I consulted calls my attention to the contrast between the older industrial districts, such as the cotton and woollen towns and the mining villages, and the new industrialism. In the former, while there is ugliness, poverty, insecurity and bad working conditions, life has a pattern and a structure. People belong to a community which they know and in which they have a place. This is much less true of the formless, rootless life of semi-skilled workers in, say, a new automobile town.

The mass-man does not belong to any particular class. Mass psychology pervades all classes. It is characteristic of the members of the wealthy, cosmopolitan crowd who in time of peace in London, New York, Paris, Vienna or Tokyo wear the same clothes, drink the same cocktails, perform the same dances to the same music, and respond in identical ways to the same stimuli. It is no less characteristic of the suburban masses, detached from any cultural or religious tradition, suffering from intolerable boredom, seeking satisfaction in any new thrill or sensation and ready to be led away by the lure of a counterfeit religion.

THE LOSS OF MEANING IN LIFE

Accompanying these developments, both facilitating them and fomented by them, is a widespread sense that life has no meaning. Large numbers are becoming sceptical and disillusioned. They do not believe that things will ever be much different from what they are ; they are not moved by promises of a new world. Hope has died in them.

Lacking any definite aim in life they become irresponsible. The weakening of the sense of responsibility is one of the disquieting features of to-day. It is seen in the breakdown of conventions regarding the relations of the sexes ; the most serious aspect of the widespread promiscuity in these relations is the irresponsibility in the relations between persons. The lack of responsibility confronts

us in the many in all classes who cannot be trusted to do an honest job of work ; in the indifference to waste or the destruction of property, so long as the Government or some one else pays. On the shifting sand of irresponsible individuals it is impossible found a democratic society.

The mechanisation of life and this breakdown of community lead inevitably to the loss of belief in God. Life has no longer any final goal or fundamental meaning ; whirl is king. While God is always directly present to men's lives, even when they do not know it, He is never present apart from other presences ; He makes Himself known in conjunction with persons and things, with nature, the family, the community, the Church. It is difficult for ordinary men to believe in Him when the natural order of the world is perverted ; when congregated in cities men are cut off from the processes of nature, and when the natural groupings of men in mutual dependence on one another are impaired. Since the knowledge of God is mediated to men through their experiences of life, it will not be restored through preaching alone ; words fall on deaf ears when they make no contact with living experience. The recovery of the lost knowledge of God, with all that it implies, will come by a double movement ; by acts of faith on the part of individuals, which make it easier for other men to believe in God, and by a progressive return to an order of society that is more in accord with God's purpose in creation.

THE MENACE OF LEVIATHAN

When communities possessing an organic life based on the mutual obligations and responsibilities of persons give place to masses, the way is prepared for dictatorship and tyranny. If men have lost the capacity for responsible action and have not been trained to exercise it in their immediate environment, they become the victims of those who know how to play on their emotions and appeal to their appetites. Modern techniques give ambitious men the opportunity of rising to power by exploiting the weaknesses of the dehumanised masses.

There are still in this country powerful centres of resistance to the establishment of a totalitarian state. There is a strong tradition of freedom and habit of spontaneous action ; there is a wide network of associations possessing a vigorous life of their own independent of the state. These are great assets in the fight against the centralisation of

power. But they are not enough to rely on. They will provide no greater protection than the Maginot line, if we settle down into the comfortable belief that what happened elsewhere cannot happen here. The danger of a fundamental and disastrous change in the structure of our society remains acute so long as deep divisions exist within the nation. Each side is in these circumstances exposed to the temptation to seize the key positions of control in order to make its own position secure. Experience teaches that a party which has obtained possession of all the centres of social control is in so strong a position that it cannot be dislodged. The democracies are in deadly peril in this war because they were too late in awaking to the menace to their way of life ; they may win the war and yet find themselves under the yoke of a dictatorship, because they have not perceived the danger and bestirred themselves in time.

The peril of a centralised control of the national life is all the greater, because the all-pervading control would, in fact, almost certainly be exercised in accordance with non-Christian or anti-Christian ideas. It is the power-loving and unscrupulous who are the ready agents of revolution. The things for which Christianity stands are dangerous to their ambitions. The power of evil is increased when it can infect and dominate a system that is able by the use of modern techniques to regulate every aspect of human life. The older tyrannies exercised an absolute power over men's bodies ; the modern authoritarian state by the control of education and all sources of information and by the power of suggestion and psychological pressure is able to invade their souls and bring them into subjection to its purposes.

WHAT IS AT STAKE

The facts that have been described are sufficiently familiar ; but they constitute the realities of our existence to-day. Our fate depends on how we deal with them. Little reflection is needed to show that these tendencies threaten the reality of the human person, that is to say, the very existence of man as man. The whole of Christianity is involved, since Christianity has no meaning except as the redemption and restoration of men to their true life as free and responsible persons, living in the world as sons of God, in free communication with other persons in trust and love and mutual responsibility. The fact that the process

which threatens the complete destruction of these values is still in its early stages ought not to blind us to the fatal direction which things are taking. That it is still, perhaps, not too late to reverse the course should impel us to resolute and vigorous action. If much of what has given to human life meaning and worth is not to disappear from the world, we shall have to fight for it with all our strength.

A COMMON PURPOSE

This Supplement has not been written in order to add a fresh diagnosis to the multitude which have already been offered in books and articles in recent years. It has a quite different purpose, which is twofold. First, to maintain that what has been set down here is not merely an individual view but represents a very wide agreement regarding the evils from which society is suffering, and that this agreement is a fact of great importance. Secondly, by recalling the main features of the predicament of society, to provide a basis for the argument that, if the analysis is true, the dangers are so formidable and real that they can be overcome only by a concerted effort inspired by a conscious common purpose, on a scale far greater than anything that exists at present. Something must come into existence which the historian of the future will recognize as having a comparable importance in history to the rise of the Communist and Nazi movements.

How may such a concerted effort come about? The British political tradition and existing political conditions in this country rule out any attempt to form a new political party, and few would regard such an attempt as desirable. Outside politics there

is little to be said for adding another organisation to the many which already exist ; by its separate existence it would in one way or another be in competition with these, and thereby hinder rather than promote the desired end of a concerted effort on the part of all who share a common purpose. If we reject the idea of a new party or organisation, what is left to us ?

The only alternative is that there should be defined a common faith and purpose sufficiently simple and clear, sufficiently relevant to the present predicament, and involving sufficiently definite obligations in regard to action, to unite those who accept it in a conscious common devotion to a common cause. It is enough to state this requirement for the difficulties of meeting it to leap to the eye. I do not know whether it can be done. But unless it can be done, I do not see how there can become alive in the mind and practice of our time a common faith, implying a fundamental attitude to life, expressing itself in a social philosophy, defining the nature of our tasks and giving direction to the activities of all who come under its influence. Only such a faith can provide a spiritual force powerful enough to turn in a new direction the tides of history. The problem cannot be solved, as I said at the beginning, unless God through our present predicament is recalling us to the fundamental realities of man's existence ; unless, that is to say, there is an answer to our problem which transcends any individual and subjective interpretation, because it is the voice not of man but of reality itself. This question will engage us in the next Supplement.

J.H.O.

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